

# SPREADING GOD'S WORD WITH RADIO

BY EDITOR IN CHIEF  
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**EDUCATIONAL  
MEDIA FOUNDATION  
CEO MIKE NOVAK**

Educational Media Foundation is on quite a roll lately. The company has been gobbling up stations and translators all across the country to “create compelling media that inspires and encourages you to have a meaningful relationship with Christ.” Back in the early days, when Bob Anthony first launched the network, there were about 70 signals carrying the K-LOVE format. And as we found out in our interview with EMF CEO Mike Novak, getting started wasn’t easy.

In fact, there were times when many working at the company thought they would have to close the doors — just waiting for checks to arrive so they could pay the bills. But they kept showing up at the rodent-infested facility, kept the radio wheels turning, and had faith. And, in 2002, with the purchase of a Denver radio station, things really started to take off.

Novak has been leading EMF’s growth spurt since 2007. He actually started with the company in 1997, advanced through the ranks, and eventually rose to CEO. That followed a successful career on the for-profit side of radio; he worked as a jock and PD at KYUU and KFRC in San Francisco, at Bill Drake and Gene Chenault’s K100 in Los Angeles, and KFMB (B100) in San Diego, where he worked for Bobby Rich.

Rich says when he hired Novak at KFMB (B100), Novak was a sharp,

smooth, and tight jock. “When I departed for the VP/GM gig in Seattle, he had already proven his leadership skills and was picked to replace me as PD. He climbed on that hog — his motorcycle, not the station — and rode it to find his true K-LOVE, and look what he’s done to it since.”

Now with 900 signals in all 50 states, EMF is a radio force to be reckoned with. One of its most recent purchases was in Chicago, where it scooped up Merlin Media’s WLUP for \$21 million when Cumulus filed for bankruptcy and backed out of an agreement it had made with Merlin to purchase the station. It certainly helps when you have a weekly cume of 20 million people, and 5-6 percent of that cume is donating an average of \$40 every month.

EMF consists of two networks — Christian AC K-LOVE and Christian Rock Air1 — with a stable of network hosts who love to play great music, preach the word of God, lead their listeners in prayer, and serve their local communities. Novak says the goal at EMF is to change people’s lives, “to present a product that people love and enjoy and interact with.” He says, “We are going to be doing this as long as God wants us to. If he chooses not to use it anymore, it’s going to be over in the blink of an eye. It is not about us. We are simply a conduit. He uses us like he uses a tool.”



**Radio Ink: Who is Mike Novak, and how did he get involved in broadcasting?**

**Novak:** I actually got into it as kind of a joke. I was an agronomy major in college, which in simple terms is a soil doctor. Having grown up in the Central Valley of California, agriculture was everything I knew. I was very sports-minded and played in high school. In my junior year I had to take an elective, and I chose broadcasting, thinking that would be fun. After about six or seven months, I went to the dean and asked if you could make a living doing this, and he said, “Yes, you can.”

That’s how I got into it. I was blessed along the way to have people I worked with who prevented me from falling into the normal trap that young announcers fall into. My third full-time job was at KFRC in San Francisco. I was the little kid on the staff up there. I kept asking the PD how and why we did this and that. I worked at KYUU in San Francisco as the operations manager – that was the first FM to beat KFRC in the ratings.

I worked for NBC for many years. I worked in Los Angeles at K100 (Bill Drake and Gene Chenault owned K100 at that time). I was a jock and the program director in my mainstream days. I worked with Bobby Rich at B100 in San Diego for many years. Then I went over to KSON, the Country station, and I was there for almost 10 years.

I had known Bob Anthony, who started K-LOVE before it was K-LOVE – Bob and I have been friends for almost 40 years. He came to me one day and said God felt that he needed to start a Contemporary Christian version of what we were in Rock radio. I was the voice of the station back then, when it was called Spirit FM. It was a single station out of Santa Rosa. I was involved with it on and off for a number of years.

Almost 21 years ago, I was having a Bible study at our house. This lady had a newsletter sticking out of her Bible, and I asked what it was. She said it was the station she listened to. It was the K-LOVE newsletter, and Bob’s picture was on the cover. I called him just to get reacquainted, and the first thing he said was, “Mike, you need to come work for us.”

I said no at first, but he kept after me, so I flew to Sacramento. That was 21 years ago. I started out as an announcer. I then became the program director, network program director, VP of programming, senior VP, and then, 11 years ago, I became the CEO. That is where we are today.

**Radio Ink: Can you tell us how the company started?**

**Novak:** Bob started it as a 501(c)(3). In my own heart I know God was involved in that because being a not-for-profit has paid off for us many, many times. It was a hand-to-mouth existence even when I first got here, in late 1997. I can honestly say there were many Fridays when we were standing at the door waiting for a check to see if we could make payroll on Monday.

There were about three or four of us who really felt the presence of the Lord in this ministry. We had a running joke that one of us was always ready to throw in the towel, but the other

**Novak on Streaming Rates: “I don’t want to limit our ability to use this great music to minister to people, but we can’t continue to pay these ever-escalating rates. We have tried to engage with SoundExchange many times, just to sit at the table, and honestly and candidly, have had no response.”**

ones would talk him out of it. We laughed, saying if we all showed up feeling that way one day, it would be a ghost town. It never did happen.

We always believed something was going to happen and there was a reason for this misery. The turning point was when we acquired the Denver signal from Colorado Christian University in 2001. It was a tipping point that allowed us to get some legs under us and reach an audience who could help us fund a particular ministry. It gave us the springboard to where we are today.

**Radio Ink: When you first started, was it just one station?**

**Novak:** No. The network had been formed, and I believe when I started there were 70 signals at the time. Today between K-LOVE and Air1 there are over 900 in all 50 states. I started in late '97, and it wasn't until about 2002 when it really started to take off.

**Radio Ink: Where were you located?**

**Novak:** When I started, it was actually here in Sacramento, but it was in a different location. We were next to a dirt field, and every time the farmer plowed the field, every rodent in the world would come in the building. We would come in and find snakes and lizards daily. We were the most inefficient thing you had ever seen in your life.

It was just an office. When the gardeners were outside doing work in the complex, you couldn't go on the air because the noise would knock the satellite receiver off the air. We had an old diesel generator that we used for backup, and the exhaust on that was the input to the air in the control room. You always knew when they were testing it because the jock on the air was blue-looking. Our engineers did everything they could to keep us on the air. It was hand-to-mouth.

**Radio Ink: What made you decide to switch out of commercial broadcasting and take on this project?**

**Novak:** That is hard to define. It's like, how do you know you're in love? I really felt God was getting to work in my life. I had already been lucky enough to work at KFRC twice, B100 in San Diego, KSON in San Diego, K100 in Los Angeles. In my mainstream career I was very blessed, but I always felt in my heart there was something more.

When I flew up here for the interview, there were three or four people in the interview, and I felt a large presence saying to me, “You need to do this.” I had been at KSON so long that I gave them a month's notice. It wasn't two or three days into that when the general manager said to me, “You really want to do this, don't you?” I said yes, and he said, “We are going to let you out. Go do what you need to do.”

After about 10 or 11 years in San Diego, within eight days I was living in Sacramento. It was incredible. I found a place to live on the first trip. I made one phone call to a mover, and he had a truck leaving in three days. I just knew it. I was given a talent to do what I do in this business. It was an opportunity to do it not just for entertainment, which is OK, but it was now for

an eternal purpose, the effect on people's lives.

**Radio Ink: When you arrived, what were the studios like? What did you see when you walked into the building?**

**Novak:** When I left KSON in San Diego, it was like the *USS Enterprise*. When I walked into K-LOVE, it was like flying a World War I plane with many holes in it. It was awful. In fact, I argued with God for a while on the way home every night. I would ask, “What did you do, and what am I doing this for?” I honestly didn't like it.

One day going home, I didn't hear a voice, but I got a sense of peace. The peace was “You need to understand, Mike, that everything I blessed you with in the mainstream” — and I got to do so many things — “everything you were exposed to, you're going to use now.” And I have.

My second day on the air, K-LOVE began a pledge drive, and I had done those before at the Country station for St. Jude's. I knew how to do it. It was a different purpose and a different verbiage, but I knew the attitude you take. Everything I've done since becoming the CEO, I learned somewhere else in my mainstream career. What I felt was put on my heart that night has come true. That furthered my trust in Christ.

**Radio Ink: Talk about the K-LOVE format.**

**Novak:** K-LOVE is an Adult Contemporary Christian radio network. It is a 501(c)(3), which means we derive our operating costs from two pledge drives per year, one in the spring and one in the fall, of about seven to eight days each. What we raise during the pledge drives is what we may have lost for the previous six months, plus if there are any projects we're working on, we build that into the goal.

You think of it as your gas gauge. It dips down to maybe 85 percent, so you are topping off the tank every single time. Our philosophy on the air is that we aren't raising money for K-LOVE, we're asking listeners to partner with us in God's work. It's like the story of the Good Samaritan, in a sense — if you recall the gentleman that was laying alongside the road. Someone came alongside, picked him up, and took him to the nearest inn. He said, “I will take care of him, but you have to help me pay or sustain this.”

That is the relationship we have with our listeners. They trust us, and they know that we are a ministry of our word in the sense that if we say we're going to do something, we follow through with it. That's how we develop those partnerships we have with our donors. The average donor at K-LOVE gives \$40 a month. We don't have any corporate giving, and no government money like NPR. We don't have any foundational giving to speak of. It's on the backs of \$40-a-month supporters.

We are in close contact with all of those people all of the time. Our retention rate, or satisfaction rate of keeping donors believing in the ministry, is over 90 percent. We work very hard at making them part of the ministry, to acknowledge them and give them the credit for it.

The philosophy behind it is our vision, which is hope ignited in Christ, and when that hap-



Mike Novak in the lobby at K-Love/Air1, in front of the networks' mission statement

pens, lives are changed, and when those two things happen, hearts are united. It's a cyclical thing, where people come into that process anywhere along the line. Our job is to continue to ignite hope in Christ, change lives, and unite hearts via contemporary Christian music and some really talented people on the radio.

They not only validate what it is God is saying through those particular Christian artists, but also their own lives. They share quite a bit on the radio. There's one on-air person in particular who puts a smile on my face. When I was at B100 in San Diego as PD, I hired the team of Jeff and Jer. They were across the street and under contract, so we would meet at night in a bar talking about their coming to work for us. We worked a deal out, and they were working for us for a number of years.

We just hired Jeff [Detrow] here, and he's on in the early afternoon on the network. Jeff is a strong believer. He just said to me the other day that he finds it so unique that he can do what he loves to do, which is being Jeff on the air, and yet he is able to share his faith and talk to people who have a like-minded vision. It's very satisfying to see many of us who came through mainstream radio end up doing Christian radio. It is more and more all the time.

**Radio Ink: Did Jeff have to do a lot of modifying of his presentation when he came to K-LOVE?**

**Novak:** A certain amount, in the sense of the same thing we all had to do when we started here. Anybody who's on the air in a local station has some crutches that don't work on the network. For instance, right now it is 10:15 – no it's not, it's 15 after. We don't even give the time. Between K-LOVE and Air1 we have a cume of approximately 20 million. That's 20 million people who sincerely know my phone number, and they use it.

Also, we use them for two-way communication. We found that our audience didn't care about the time or the weather. It's a whole different relationship the listener has with K-LOVE than a normal for-profit station. You have to wash yourself of all those crutches. You feel naked the first few times you go on the air. Then you realize there's so much more you can share with the listener along the lines of faith and your true personality.

That's one of the many things that has intrigued me about Jeff. I call him a 13-year-old trapped in a 50-something-year-old body. He just has fun, and our listeners have fun listening to him. He does it in a very family-friendly, safe way. He's not afraid to talk about his faith because our listeners expect us to.

That's why I said at the beginning God had his hand in us being a not-for-profit station. We can do things on the air that our listeners want us to do, not necessarily what Wall Street might want us to do if we were a for-profit sta-

tion. There are some for-profit Christian radio groups who won't pray on the air because the people financing them are really upset with that, or are potentially upset. We have the freedom to do what our listeners want us to do, and what they encourage us to do. That is who K-LOVE is.

We have a program built in our software that will allow us to separate any of those 900-plus signals into a separate studio and broadcast just to them, or we can separate it by ZIP code, or by state or time zone, and broadcast just to them.

K-LOVE was really honored by the NAB last year at the Service to America Awards. We won the Local Station of the Year through our San Antonio affiliate, by having boots on the ground and being very present in the community, serving the community, by going hands-on with our teams, and inviting listeners to join us. In the words of one FCC commissioner, we out-located the local station. We work very hard at that, and we want to do that.

We came up with the technology that allows us to do that. In one sense we are a network, and in one sense we are extremely local. If you ask the local person anywhere in the U.S. where K-LOVE is, they usually point at their heart and say "It's in here."

**Radio Ink: How big is the airstaff on the network?**

**Novak:** Full-time on the air, about 11.

## SIDEBAR

**What are your hobbies?**

Anything outdoors – riding my Harley, fishing, hunting, and hiking.

**Who is/was your role model and why?**

My dad. His honesty, kindness, and his sense of community and responsibility and always urging me to “do the right thing.”

**What are you reading right now?**

This question.

**Favorite movie?**

*Top Gun.*

**Favorite TV Show?**

*Longmire.*

**Who are the two most interesting people you know (outside your family) and why?**

1. Joe Gorder, CEO of Valero. He’s just a down-to-earth, real guy who loves people and loves the Lord.
2. Michael McDowell, NASCAR driver number 34. He’s one of the wisest young men I know. His relationship with Christ and his willingness to share that is unbelievable.

**If you had 30 minutes, a tape recorder, and your choice, who would you interview and why?**

Winston Churchill. Recently saw the movie *The Darkest Hour* about his life, and a lot of questions were left unanswered.

**Name three stations you listened to as a kid.**

KFRC. KFRC. KFRC.

**What three apps do you have on your phone that would surprise people?**

Ballistic, Practice Tree, Calm.

**Do you listen to Pandora or Spotify ever?**

Who are they?

**Your most embarrassing career moment?**

Played back a prerecorded Portuguese-language show backwards and didn’t even realize it.

**What one goal has eluded you?**

Professional baseball player.

**Most proud career achievement so far?**

Just to be part of what God is doing at K-LOVE and Air1.

**When you die, what will people say about you?**

“There’s an opening at K-LOVE and Air1.”





Mike Novak at a recent speaking engagement.

**Radio Ink: And that is now in a different building than when you started?**

**Novak:** Oh, yes. Everything is done out of Rocklin, a suburb of Sacramento, except the K-LOVE and Air1 morning shows, which are done out of Indianapolis. We are on the West Coast, the wrong coast to be a network, as time goes east to west, not west to east. For a long time our morning shows were getting up at 1:30 in the morning. You cannot do that to people very long before they start acting very strange.

About six years ago, a facility became available to us in Indianapolis, and we moved 12 families from California to Indiana. We have a building and a studio. It's a complete redundant center, so if California ever does break off and float away, K-LOVE and Air1 will still be on the air.

**Radio Ink: You said you have 900 signals in all 50 states. Break that down and how the network has to be carried by the affiliates.**

**Novak:** They all carry it complete. We don't allow them to strip it out. They all carry both networks 24/7/365. We own probably a little over half of those signals. There is another quarter that we LMA. The remaining of those could be classified as translators. They all pick up the same programming, and they all have the same local capability.

**Radio Ink: Of the 900, how many are K-LOVE?**

**Novak:** About 750 belong to K-LOVE, the remainder to Air1. If K-LOVE is an AC station, then Air1 is more of a Rock station. There is a genre within

contemporary Christian music that I would call rock. If you analyze the playlists of both, there's probably a third that's musically a crossover.

We discovered a big difference between the two formats about five years ago. We were doing a research project, and we have the typical P1 K-LOVE listener and the typical Air1 listener. And, as it turned out, they weren't that far apart. They have the same attributes – 3 and 1/2 kids, a white picket fence – but a funny thing happened when we stuck them in the same room: they wouldn't talk to each other.

We have moved away from demographics and do more audience-based research on psychographics, meaning what's going on between their ears. The typical fan of K-LOVE views our relationship as a marriage. To date, the typical fan of Air1 views the relationship as "We've dated a couple of times, but I may not like you tomorrow." It's a maturity-level difference.

Not to say that Air1 is immature; it's just a younger-thinking and younger-acting audience. On a faith-basis level, they are both just as engaged. Air1 is progressing, as I've been here and watching. The maturity level is getting deeper and deeper, but K-LOVE has had years of a head start on them.

**Radio Ink: Mike, you have been able to expand the networks' number of stations, and it hasn't been cheap. How are you able to do that, only having two fundraisers a year? For example, how did you come up with \$21 million for the station in Chicago?**

**Novak:** Because God has been very good to

us, and we have faithful listeners and donors. I have the fiduciary responsibility of managing the money that donors give us. We are always highest-rated by all the watchdog companies. The amount we spend for administration is very small.

It does take a lot of money to run radio stations, but that means we have a lot of people who believe in us and give us money. We are able to put that money right back into the product, and that's where we get the money to purchase the stations. I don't think we've done 100 percent cash with any of them to date, but now that we have a track record, it's very easy to get financing.

Since I've been here for the last 21 years, we've never lost a station or missed a payment, and we've been able to take God's word to places we didn't think we'd be invited to. It's a little different having the history to get into a taxi cab in Times Square and listen to K-LOVE. We are now in Los Angeles. We just got The Loop in Chicago, which everybody's talking about.

We didn't do that. God guides this place, and it is his ministry. I am the head shepherd here. I seek wisdom every single day, and he provides it for us. We use the money to further his ministry. Nobody is getting rich doing this. It's a passion and love. We put everything back into the product. Our mission within that vision is to get the word out, let God use the music to reach his people. When an opportunity comes along, we are in a position to be able to take advantage of it. We are pretty well set for now. We are very careful how we spend our money.



“Winning hearts for Christ is how we measure our success. So many groups have moved away from content. Even in the rock ‘n’ roll days, content drove the show. We had a lot of fun and impacted a lot of lives, and it is the same philosophy we are using here, but for a different reason.”

**Radio Ink: Do you have to get board approval, or are you making the decisions? Are you working the deal yourself?**

**Novak:** In this case, the method is I will be involved along with the gentleman from our signal development in negotiating the best deal we can. We do not pay street rates. We do not have that type of money, and I have the fiduciary responsibility to be wise with the donations. We usually beat him up pretty bad.

We have walked away from far more deals than we make because they don't fit our parameters. When we make a deal, we intend to hang on to it. We get the best deal we can, and then I take it to the board chairman. He runs it through our finance committee, which includes: how are we going to pay for it, what are we going to pay in cash, and what are we going to finance? Our vetting system is really tough, and if it all comes back on the green side of the board, we go back and say yes.

We've had a couple of deals where they said, "If you can do that, then you can do this," and we've had to say, "No, thanks." Those are the ones we walk away from. There is an airtight vetting system that it goes through.

**Radio Ink: How big is the board?**

**Novak:** Six full-time, and I am the seventh. The board is over the entire foundation, which includes other departments. We have different ministries that we do via the radio station, but they are separate, standalone ministries.

**Radio Ink: Do you have a board op at every station?**

**Novak:** No. If we don't have a studio waiver, there is someone there. We have technology where it will react to the commands sent from here. We have a full-time network operations center that looks much like the control room at NASA. There are two to three people in there. They have gotten to the point where they can predict weather and they can call our contract engineer in that area and say, "It's going to snow tonight, so be ready."

When we give tours of the place, that's one place people stop and say, "Oh, my goodness." It has maps and satellite of the United States. It's a very sophisticated system. We do have people probably in the top 10 markets where they do the promotions, ascertainment, and legal things. They are teams of five, six, or seven people. You don't need a board op per se anymore.

**Radio Ink: How do digital and apps fit into your plan?**

**Novak:** K-LOVE is certainly in the streaming business, and we have a K-LOVE app. We also have something called My K-LOVE, which is a social app, then a few other subsidiary apps that have to do with prayer. I fully recognize the future is swinging more toward digital, but what concerns me about digital is that I'm not seeing anything that supports it monetarily.

At this point we pay for everything, meaning we don't run ads on the website, which we could. We don't charge for the apps. It's all under the banner of "we want to give it away."

That will have to change at some point, I'm afraid. We have invested in all these platforms, but which one is going to stick? My theory is the listener will tell us where they want to be. That's where we'll go deeper.

Right now one of the biggest pinches in the side is SoundExchange. We're probably the largest contemporary Christian music-driven network around, and we pay a whole lot of money to stream music. And if that's where it's going, there must be some common thinking and goal between the SoundExchange people and broadcasters.

In my opinion, the amount we pay is prohibitive. I don't want to limit our ability to use this great music to minister to people, but we can't continue to pay these ever-escalating rates. We've been involved in what negotiations there are. I am on the NAB board, so I am aware from that point of view, but also from a local point of view, we have tried to engage with SoundExchange many times, just to sit at the table, and honestly and candidly, have had no response.

**Radio Ink: With the uniqueness of your format and the loyalty of your listeners, do you think you could get away with not streaming?**

**Novak:** I don't think so. I think we have to be in that particular field. We have to make the signal available. You are right that we have many stations, but people listen to us at work via the stream. I think that is where it is going, so there has to be some sort of a long-term plan to be a win-win for everybody.

I know that sounds elementary, but it is very lopsided right now. I'm not one to take away from an artist or a composer, but we tried reading the lyrics to songs on the radio and it didn't work, so this relationship has to work. You don't want your song played on the radio and feel you don't need that promotion aspect, well, then, the best of luck to you. I have never met an artist that didn't credit radio, no matter what genre they're from, with helping them promote their wares. We have to get along.

**Radio Ink: What is the goal for the company?**

**Novak:** To sustain it and keep it going and present a product that people love and enjoy and interact with. We are going to be doing this as long as God wants us to. If he chooses not to use it anymore, it's going to be over in the blink of an eye. I have proof of lives that have been impacted and changed. I have hundreds of thousands of stories. I know what he's doing with this network, and that has sustained me and keeps us coming back.

I want to see us figure out and learn how we can serve people better on a more personal level, where we connect them with God. It is not about us. We are simply a conduit. He uses us like he uses a tool. It is the music coming out the other end that really connects with people; it isn't the hardware of the radio station. I say during pledge drives, "Don't give because we ask you. We ask you to pray about it, and if God puts that on your heart, then be obedient, great.

If he doesn't, that's fine too." In the Bible it says he loves a cheerful giver. We want cheerful partners. We are not about to change that. He has called us.

In the future, I want us to continue what we're doing, take advantage of technology, find better and more convenient ways to connect with people, and figure out the digital space because that's where it's going.

**Radio Ink: What markets would you still like to be in?**

**Novak:** Being a broker-driven market, we wait for them to come to us. In the 21 years I have been here, we have never targeted one. They have come to us first. A lot of listeners to other stations don't believe that and complain, but we say, "They were selling it." I would love to have God's word through contemporary Christian music over Washington, DC.

**Radio Ink: When are the pledge dates?**

**Novak:** April 3 starts the Air1 pledge drive and it goes to April 13. K-LOVE is April 17-27. In the fall Air1 is September 25-October 5 and K-LOVE is October 16-26.

**Radio Ink: What do you want the industry to know about EMF they might not know?**

**Novak:** I believe God's hands are all over K-LOVE and Air1. I am humbled and sincerely and honestly can't believe that I'm in the chair, I'm in these two ministries. It has been a fascinating

journey, and it is not over. One of the things I as a leader have to be careful of is that I don't get in front of God, that I wait on him.

I have been in this business a long time. It's all about what is on the radio. Content is king. When I started here, their watchword was to be the best Contemporary Christian radio network, and I've changed that to be the best radio network we can be that happens to be Christian.

It allows you to ask two more words: why not? Why *shouldn't* we do that? The other way feels narrow and restrictive. This way gives more latitude to get involved in ways that people interact with. The most important thing is, What are you providing to the listener? Why should they listen to you? I think radio has moved away from that with consolidation as it became all sales. The opposite is true here. It's all about content.

We ask people what they want, and then we give it to them. No matter the format, if you are in tune with your listeners and give them what they want, and believe it, you will be "successful." In our case, success means something totally different. Winning hearts for Christ is how we measure our success.

So many groups have moved away from content. Even in the rock 'n' roll days, content drove the show. We had a lot of fun and impacted a lot of lives, and it is the same philosophy we are using here, but for a different reason.

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